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WOLFGANG FRANKE

Smollett's *Humphry Clinker* as a "Party Novel"

Modern Smollett scholarship has thrown most valuable light on the historical and biographical background of *Humphrey Clinker*. The novel has been placed in the political context of the decade preceding its publication in 1772 and seen in relation to Smollett's journalistic activities at the time.¹ As a result the historical validity of Hazlitt's critical dictum - "perhaps . . . the most pleasant gossiping novel that ever was written"²—has been questioned and Horace Walpole's apparently singular verdict—"a party novel, written by the profligate hireling Smollett, to vindicate the Scots and cry down juries"³—justified. What has not yet been done is to investigate to what extent Smollett's propagandistic intention functions as a principle of organization in the novel as a whole. This is what I propose to do in this article. I shall discuss the various aspects of the novel and examine their contribution to the total effect of persuasion. To do this, some of the background material mentioned above must first be summed up briefly.

In spite of the Union, or perhaps just because of it, anti-Scottish feeling was latent in England throughout the eighteenth century. It was due to the steady inflow of needy Scottish immigrants, who with their proverbial thrift, intelligence and industry formed unwelcome competitors for jobs or rivals in business. When Smollett came to London in 1739 he himself was a typical example of the young Scotsman on the make, and that he evoked equally typical reactions on the part of the Londoners can be deduced from the relevant passages in *Roderick Random*, which are largely autobiographical. This latent animosity flared up in 1745, when it was given apparent justification by Scottish support for the Young Pretender. The rather dubious loyalty of many Englishmen was perhaps compensated after the event

1. For a summary of research and a select bibliography see Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, ed. L. M. Knapp. Oxford English Novels (1966). All quotations from the text of the novel refer to this edition.

2. *Lectures on the English Comic Writers, Complete Works*, (London, 1931) VI, 117.

3. *Memoirs of the Reign of King George III*, (London, 1845) IV, 328.

by an exaggerated display of chauvinism. The rebellion was seen as the last in a long line of Scottish attacks on English peace and prosperity. Smollett, who was on his way home from a coffee-house with his fellow-Scotsman Alexander Carlyle, when the news of Culloden arrived, had to warn his friend not to speak, in case his accent betrayed him and aroused the insolence of the mob. Smollett was outraged at the cruelty that the Scots had to suffer at the hands of the victors, and voiced his protest in the poem *The Tears of Caledonia*, as he was at pains later on in his *History of England* to point out that the Pretender had met with strong resistance in Scotland and that he owed his initial successes mainly to the incompetence of government and army. In *Peregrine Pickle* he describes the miserable lot of the Scottish exiles in Boulogne and makes a powerful plea for an amnesty. In the continual war between literary reviewers in which Smollett engaged in the fifties his opponents were not above attacking him and his collaborators on account of their Scottish origin. New fuel was added to the flames with the administration of the Earl of Bute, which began in May 1762. In accordance with the King's wishes Bute concluded a peace treaty with France, thus relieving the landed and predominantly Tory aristocracy of the burden of the land tax, by which wars were financed, but abandoning some of Pitt's war aims, dear to Whig commercial interest. From the day on which he took up office Bute had his policy advocated by Smollett in *The Briton*, to which the opposition retaliated with *The North Briton*, ably but ruthlessly edited by the redoubtable John Wilkes. In the propaganda of the opposition anti-Scottish prejudice was deliberately put to use. The ostensibly British policy of Bute was denounced as North British, i.e. subservient to Scottish interests. Charles Churchill's satire *The Prophecy of Famine*, published in 1763, the only document of this press campaign aspiring to any literary value, is a kind of locus classicus for charges against the Scots. The same vein was again exploited in the famous *Junius Letters*, which appeared from 1768 to 1772 in the *Public Advertiser*. All these charges can be subsumed under two headings: poverty at home as the cause of their immigration, and what was called "nationality" abroad, i.e. their sticking together as a close-knit minority, promoting one another's interests. Right up to the time when *Humphry Clinker* was written relations between the two peoples were thus upon anything but an even keel, and when Smollett came to write on Scotland and the Scots in his novel, it may be assumed that he was actuated by more powerful motives than the nostalgia of an invalid exile for the arcadia of his youth.

What has been said so far is, however, subject to an important

minor qualification. Anti-Scottish feeling was on the whole a popular phenomenon, confined to the middle and lower classes, though it was played up to for political purposes by members of the upper classes. The elite shared the cosmopolitan assumptions of the European enlightenment. For them men were essentially the same, regardless of differences in language or dialect. National differences as such were nothing to be proud of, as they were the result of the irrational and arbitrary course of history. If one took pride in the state one lived in, it was because one regarded it as the most reasonable form of political organization. The English and the Scots could thus be equally proud of those common British institutions which John Locke had approved and contemporary French philosophers admired. Though the educated knew quite well what was required of them, they were not always able to live up to this ideal. What Boswell has to say about Dr. Johnson on this point is quite illuminating. Johnson repeats the popular anti-Scottish remarks, but with a characteristic difference: "They amused themselves with persevering in the old iokes."⁴ This ironical detachment is, however, not always kept up, and on occasion Dr. Johnson really means what he says. Then Boswell can only point to the "stratum of common clay under the rock of marble."⁵ The same applies to people like Horace Walpole or William Mason. They know that national prejudices are "vulgar" or "illiberal", but they are unable to rise above them. Smollett was, of course, aware of the pretensions of the upper classes to an enlightened attitude as something he could put to good account.

Besides the negative and the neutral attitude faint indications of a new positive attitude to Scotland were beginning to show in the sixties. Among the men of letters Ossian produced a wave of enthusiasm for the Highlands with their melancholy charm of a passing civilization and the sublimity of their mountain scenery. This, too, is hinted at in *Humphry Clinker*, though Smollett was too deeply rooted in the eighteenth century to be quite aware of the possibilities that offered here, and too shrewd to commit himself on the Macpherson issue.—Smollett was thus not facing a monolithic attitude of antipathy. What he had to do was to raise the general public to the level of the cultural elite.

In choosing the novel as his vehicle of propaganda Smollett is employing a medium of fairly wide popular appeal and reaching below

4. J. Boswell, *The Life of Dr. Johnson*, Everyman Ed. (London, 1949), II, 54.

5. J. Boswell, *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Dr. Samuel Johnson* (London, 1955), p. 31.

the level of the elite. In his novels he had always deliberately abstained from author's comment, as he preferred his material, which was certainly not lacking, to speak for itself, thus creating the impression of objectivity. In the epistolary form, which he gives to *Humphry Clinker*, the narrator disappears altogether, leaving the stage for the letter-writers and their comments. The air of objectivity and unlimited opportunity for apparently irresponsible comment are thus successfully combined. It hardly needs to be pointed out that this is an ideal position for a propagandist. His influence is the more effective, the less noticeable it is. As soon as it assumes the form of obtrusive comments by a personally committed narrator, the reader is automatically put on his guard and his resistance to persuasion is aroused.

To confirm the illusion of objectivity Richardson and his successors pretended to be only the editors and not the authors of their fictitious correspondences. Smollett goes even further than that by assigning the role of editor to an imaginary Welsh clergyman and prefacing the novel proper by a correspondence between the clergyman and his publisher in London about the possible legal consequences of publishing letters by living persons. The editor's existence is recalled to the reader's mind by occasional footnotes. Smollett's own appearances as a character in the novel contribute to the effect of objectivity. If Smollett had only given the letters of one correspondent, that correspondent's views might all too easily have been identified with his own. This is what happened in the case of the *Travel through France and Italy*, where the narrator was taken by contemporaries for Smollett himself, as Sterne's allusions to *Smelfungus* testify, whereas modern criticism regards him as a fictional character with a perspective of his own, the misanthropical hypochondriac, just as different from Smollett as Yorick is from Sterne. By introducing five letter-writers with different points of view Smollett forestalls such facile identifications. Moreover the reader is induced to lend an ear to views that may be abhorrent to him, because they do not concern him as such, but only in so far as they characterize the person who holds them. Political propaganda, thus conveyed, loses its edge and appears as a pleasant idiosyncrasy.

But the reporting by several correspondents can also serve to underline one view. When persons who usually disagree are for once unanimous in their opinion, its force hardly bears contradiction. Bramble and Melford usually differ in England. What annoys Bramble, amuses Melford. In Scotland, however, their opinions coincide, e.g. when they are discussing hospitality.

Besides the epistolary form with its divided point of view something

must be said about the way the characters condition opinion. In the picaresque tradition, which Smollett continued in England, the hero usually starts his career among the dregs of the population and then works his way up in society, uninhibited by any moral scruples. Smollett alters the social status of these heroes, raising them to his own level. But in spite of their upper-class background they are then socially displaced by some misfortune or fault of their own, and like their disreputable ancestors, mix with all classes of society in a life of rather doubtful morality, a privilege granted them by right of their youth, until they achieve wealth, married bliss and respectability, usually all at one stroke. In *Humphry Clinker* the adventurer has been superseded by the tourist. It is still on the road, as it were, that the various scenes of life are presented. The travellers, however, are no longer in search of fortune, but of health and amusement. Bramble is a country gentleman of independent means and his family shares his social status. It is quite obvious that the informed comment of well educated members of the leisured classes will command more respect with the reading public than the chance opinions of adventurers on the road. Smollett is aiming at the snobbish impulses of his audience, which will prefer to identify with the educated members of the traveling party. Bramble's description of his misconceptions about Scotland as "illiberal" proves the point, "illiberal" being the label usually attached to unenlightened, vulgar attitudes.⁶

The Welsh origin of the travellers is also by no means accidental. It must be admitted that it does not make them equally impartial to England and Scotland, as they know England well and share English prejudices, though it may be easier for them to abandon them. But Wales provides them with a frame of reference much more favorable to Scotland than England would have been. Apart from that there are occasional stirrings of a sentiment of celtic solidarity.⁷ So much for the common background of the characters and its influence upon their attitudes. But may not some individual traits of character also owe their origin to the propagandistic intentions of their author? - Bramble's character is constructed upon a very simple mechanism. His health and his temper are mutually dependent. In England, where he fails to find health, he only sees moral, social and architectural chaos. In the bracing air of Scotland his health is restored and everything appears to him in the most favorable light. - Melford is a rather immature young man, who is traveling for amusement, captivated by novelty, variety and change. If Bath and London appeal to him for these reasons, Scotland

6. p. 231.

7. p. 240.

even more so. His convictions are not the result of deep thought, but uncritically assimilated from the circles he happens to move in. He hardly notices himself how quickly they change with a change of milieu. The prejudice against the Scots, which he has unconsciously imbibed in England, evaporates just as unconsciously in Scotland, where he even falls into the local accent. - Lydia is at the very impressionable age of first love and conforms to the fashionable cult of sensibility. Her letters are parodies of the affected style of sublimity and abound in expressions like *astomishing, incredible, grand, vast, magnificent, superb, stupendous, prodigious, exquisite, ravishing, divine*. She is thus ideally sensitive to the beauty of Scottish scenery. Tabitha is one of Smollett's grotesques in the vein of Lesage, a "fantastical animal", as Bramble calls her.⁸ Nevertheless she also serves her purpose in Smollett's plan. Her very pertinacity in prejudice in spite of contradictory evidence makes prejudice ridiculous. Who would like to be as ignorant and stupid as Tabitha? But she has to play yet another role. In her man-hunting she tries to ingratiate herself with the most fulsome flatteries. Encomia on Scotland flow from her lips, while she is wooing a Scotsman. Her abuse later on is transparently due to the disappointment of her hopes. What her views eventually are is not disclosed, but she leaves the stage as the wife of a Scotsman. - Winifred Jenkins is also a comic character, surpassing even Mrs. Malaprop in the outrageousness of her spelling. Smollett avails himself of her comic perspective for describing abuses in Scotland, such as the famous *Gardeloo*, for which this is after all the most favorable point of view.

There is a striking difference in form and content between the English and Scottish letters. The English letters contain the development of the plot and are full of adventures, anecdotes and satirical portraits. Their charm consists in the contrast between different points of view. The Scottish letters are undramatic, didactic and descriptive in comparison. Interest in the plot round Lydia and Tabitha is only just kept alive. Typical of this part of the book are the detailed descriptions, which might be taken from a guidebook. Even a landscape poem is inserted. The artistic effect of the different points of view is almost completely discarded. Bramble and Melford write six long letters each, Winifred two, Lydia only one, and Tabitha none at all. Moreover, Bramble's and Melford's views hardly differ any longer. It seems that Smollett avoided the repetition, which presentation from different angles requires, because he wanted to cram as much factual material as possible into these letters. Prejudice, he must have thought, was largely due to ignorance. Consequently the picture of Scotland by far

8. p. 12.

surpasses in completeness whatever is said about England, though the Scottish letters amount only to a quarter of the book. The charges of the prejudiced against Scotland are never explicitly mentioned in these letters, but they are implied in the continual astonishment of the travellers. The journey through Scotland can be regarded as a process of enlightenment. Abuses are not overlooked, but made the occasion for friendly suggestions for improvement.

Beside the English and Scottish letters the three letters from Melford and Bramble, written immediately before setting foot in Scotland, form a group by themselves. They report conversations with the Scottish lieutenant Lismahago. Smollett conjures up a thunderstorm to keep the travellers in their inn with plenty of time at their disposal. These letters are worth analysing in detail to show in what subtle way Smollett directs the responses of his readers. Lismahago is first introduced as one of those fantastic oddities in which Melford and his friend delight. In his character an exaggerated sense of honour and a tendency to contradiction bordering on contentiousness form a highly explosive mixture. No doubt, this advocate of Scotland is a comic figure. The reader is prepared to laugh with Melford at this man and his views. Lismahago begins to assume a certain stoical dignity, when his reaction to doggerel verses against the Scots is discussed. The reader is left to choose whether to join the immature and raw Melford in his amusement or the mature and sensitive Bramble in his feeling of shame. Lismahago then appears to defend the English. These verses cannot represent English opinion, he says, as his country could not possibly arouse the envy of a neighbor as powerful as England. Thus he succeeds in turning criticism into a compliment. When his contention that English is pronounced better in Edinburgh than in London arouses Melford's mirth, he points out that if risibility was a sign of rationality, the English must be the most rational people on earth. Melford, not to be outdone in politeness by a Scotsman, replies that the Scots are at least as rational as the English, though lacking a sense of humour. Lismahago accepts the positive part of this statement, which represents a remarkable concession from his opponent, but questions the negative part. Humour, he says, depends on the resources of language, and as the English do not understand Scots, they cannot judge Scottish humour. This argument carries at least so much conviction for Melford that he decides to buy Allan Ramsay's Works. Whereupon Lismahago gets lost in another attempt to vindicate his views on English pronunciation. As Smollett is far from sharing Lismahago's views and his own opinion is probably represented by Bramble's recommendation that the Scots should acquire the English accent, he must be set on re-

establishing the original view of Lismahago as an advocate of preposterous views, so that the reader may expect further amusement from him. - The following conversation is reported by Bramble, who is inclined to take Lismahago more seriously than Melford. In other words, there is a change of perspective in favor of Lismahago. By Lismahago's initial self-denial his partners are induced to pay compliments to him and his fellow-countrymen, which he is too modest to accept, but does not contradict. As soon as they disparage the Scots, he rushes to their defense. In the course of the conversation he proves that the Scots do not get more than their fair share of government jobs, that flourishing trade is the ruin of a nation, Parliament the most corrupt part of the British constitution, freedom of the press a national misfortune, the English jury system inferior to the Scottish. In this case Bramble reports Lismahago's opinions without stating his own objections, summing up:

You must not imagine that all these deductions were made on his part, without contradiction on mine. — No — the truth is, I found myself piqued in point of honour, at his pretending to be so much wiser than his neighbours. I questioned all his assertions, started innumerable objections, argued and wrangled with uncommon perseverance, and grew very warm, and even violent, in the debate. — Sometimes he was puzzled, and once or twice, I think, fairly refuted . . .⁹

The reader, however, does not know which of Lismahago's opinions have been accepted and which refuted, and must examine them himself. Once again Lismahago's success in the discussion is subsequently qualified. It is ascribed not to the superiority of his arguments, but to his rhetorical training as a lawyer. - During the tour in Scotland Lismahago leaves the travellers. After this preparation the presentation of Scotland is not burdened with any further polemics. Only after seeing Scotland with their own eyes do the travellers meet Lismahago again. In the final conversation it becomes evident that the travellers have become friends of Scotland. But even this conversion does not satisfy Lismahago, if it is not granted that honest poverty is no disgrace and that the union has not brought any advantages to Scotland. Bramble comes to the conclusion:

Though I did not receive all his assertions as gospel, I was not prepared to refute them; and I cannot help now acquiescing in his remarks so far as to think, that the contempt for Scotland, which prevails too much on this side the Tweed, is founded on prejudice and error.¹⁰

9. p. 206.

10. p. 279.

The defence of Scotland is consequently not ironically reported as an aberration of an eccentric by persons who reject it indignantly, - a method which Smollett had used in *The Briton*. In *Humphry Clinker* the attitude of the writers to the advocate of Scotland shifts and changes in many subtle gradations, from laughter and rejection to approval and conviction.

It has been seen how important the English letters are in engaging the reader's sympathy for the travellers and their different points of view, and that they pave the way for a new approach to Scotland. But their significance for the Scottish section may go further than that. The English letters serve to put the Scottish into relief. It is the old contrast between corrupt civilization and arcadian simplicity.¹¹ It becomes first evident in the different treatment the travellers receive at the hands of their hosts in England and Scotland, hospitality being one of the arcadian virtues. A similar contrast is implied in what is said about English and Scottish clergymen. The contrast between air and food in England and Scotland has already been touched on in connexion with Bramble's health. Further examples might be given.

The Lydia-Dennison plot has always been regarded as rather conventional and insipid. This is no doubt true. But there is a thematic correspondence between this plot and the Scottish journey, which is pointed out by Melford:

I am, however, mortified to reflect what flagrant injustice we every day commit, and what absurd judgment we form, in viewing objects through the falsifying medium of prejudice and passion. Had you asked me a few days ago, the picture of Wilson the player, I should have drawn a portrait very unlike the real person and character of George Dennison—Without all doubt, the greatest advantage acquired in travelling and perusing mankind in the original, is that of dispelling those shameful clouds that darken the faculties of the mind, preventing it from judging with candour and precision.¹²

The Lydia-Dennison plot is far too sketchy to justify pursuing this analogy. Suffice it to say that it is intended, at least as an afterthought, and that in the passage just quoted Smollett himself hints at the wider philosophic implications which he had in mind. National prejudice is

11. M. A. Goldberg in *Smollett and the Scottish School* (Albuquerque, 1959) has made hardly tenable claims for a basic contrast between primitivism and progress in *Humphry Clinker*. It is surely a case of misapplied ingenuity, when even Clinker's naked backside receives a symbolic interpretation.

12. p. 332.

only an example of prejudice generally, which must be fought in all its forms.

That Hazlitt's interpretation of the novel should have been possible at all is really the measure of Smollett's success as a propagandist. He disguised his intention so well, that later critics were able to ignore it altogether.

Erlangen